

**Testimony of Montgomery County Council President, George L. Leventhal
to the Committee on Government Reform
September 6, 2006**

As you know, gang violence is increasing in the Metropolitan Washington area. In Montgomery County, we are trying to combat this increase with a comprehensive and regional approach – one that addresses prevention and early intervention, as well as enforcement. We are doing this not only through our joint efforts with Prince George's County but also through work at the Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments.

I would like to thank our friends from Virginia, Representatives Tom Davis and Frank Wolf for their tremendous support in Congress for anti-gang initiatives that will benefit all citizens of the metro region.

There are between 20 and 28 active gangs in Montgomery County and 680 to 930 persons identified as gang members. The numbers change as gangs come and go, as arrests are made, and as people move in and out of the area. The majority of gang members are young people between the ages of 15 and 21. We know that, while gang issues are county-wide, activity is more prevalent in areas with higher numbers of economically disadvantaged persons.

Prevention and early intervention are critical. When young people cannot find stability, support, friendship, and activities in their own homes, schools and communities, they become vulnerable to the invitations of gang recruiters.

Effective law enforcement and prosecution are also critical because often, gangs are held together by a small number of older gang members. When these individuals are taken off the street, many times the gang will dissolve.

The number of gang members being held in our local jails and being supervised in community programs is also increasing. This brings new challenges to housing inmates and providing effective rehabilitation services.

We are very appreciative of the Federal funds that have been provided. I would like to take this opportunity to focus on our FY 2007 request:

After School Programs. Montgomery County is requesting \$1.4 million in funds to help us provide high quality after school programs. Keeping our young people active and engaged during after school hours is not only important for preventing gang activity but many other problem behaviors. The County Council hears from young people who ask us to help make sure they have activities and places to go. The County will expand our Rec Extra program so it is available in all our middle schools. We responded to requests from Blair High School students to make sure their Sports Academy program could continue and we are expanding this to Einstein High School as well. We are partnering with the public schools and non-profit, and faith-based organizations to make sure that after school program not only provide recreational opportunities but are also successful in improving young people's success in school. Our request to you stated the following expected benefits from the \$1.4 million requested:

- Increase in school attendance and student participation in school activities;
- Reduction in suspensions and disciplinary actions;
- Improvement in school completion rates;
- Reduction in illegal and risky behavior;
- Improved sense of safety and belonging on the part of youth;
- Increased sense of competence and confidence; and

- Reduction in disproportionate minority representation in the juvenile justice and adult criminal justice systems

Street Outreach Network. The County asks you to provide \$260,000 to support our efforts to establish and sustain a Street Outreach Network. This team would be comprised of former gang members and modeled after the “Roving Leader” program. The team will work directly for the Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator, and will allow the County to establish strategic relations with gang involved youth.

Centralized Police Gang Unit. The County asks that you provide \$486,900 to continue funding for a centralized gang investigation unit. The County currently has officers who work out of each of the district stations but have a centralized unit of investigators. This effort is expected to greatly enhance our enforcement capabilities.

High School Wellness Centers. The County is requesting \$1 million to help us expand our efforts to provide high school wellness centers at high-risk schools. The funds would allow 2 new centers to be established. They would provide targeted services to youth who face significant challenges with poverty, youth and gang violence, teen pregnancy, and school failure.

Youth Opportunity Centers. The County is requesting just over \$3 million to allow us to establish Youth Opportunity and Development Centers in addition to our joint Center in Takoma/Langley Park. You will hear Carolyn Colvin, our County Health and Human Services Director, tell you about the activities at the current center which I believe will be very successful in helping young people who may have already been in trouble to work on their education, job training, and employment.

In addition to the federal funds that we are requesting, Montgomery County has already made a significant investment in combating gang activity. For the current fiscal year alone, the County Council has appropriated \$5.8 million to 22 different programs, non-profit organizations and agencies to address the issue, including funds for additional police officers, after school programs, mental health initiatives and community programs.

As you can see, Montgomery County is trying to take a comprehensive and regional approach to the growing problem of gang activity. We will continue to work with our neighboring counties, our municipalities, and our partners in the both the private and non-profit sectors, but we will not be successful without the needed resources that federal funding will provide. I look forward to working with you to bring an end to gang violence in our region.